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SUBJECT: IRAN: MOUSAVI CAMPAIGN ACTIVISTS RECOUNT EXPERIENCES

REF: RPO DUBAI 373

Classified By: ConGen Istanbul Deputy Principal Officer Win Dayton; Reason 1.5 (d).

1. (C) Summary: Two Mousavi campaign activists who recently came to Turkey to avoid re-arrest in Iran described their experiences in detention and told us that: the regime is obsessively afraid of former President Khatami, but less so of Mousavi and Rafsanjani; that the purpose of the "show trials" is to prevent any fledgling pro-democracy movement from successfully organizing; and that the regime has alienated so many Iranians that it probably cannot survive another year. They urged the USG to speak more about human rights and democracy in Iran and less about the nuclear program; not to pursue tougher economic sanctions, which only enrich the IRGC; and to help several named exiled activists with technology that can help them keep information flowing into and out of Iran. The two activists do not plan to seek refugee status in Turkey, and are weighing other options. End summary.

2. (C) ConGen Istanbul's NEA "Iran Watcher" and Pol-econ human rights officer met September 2-3 in Istanbul with an Iranian journalist, Ruhollah Shahsavar and a student leader, Daniel Mohamedzadeh (please strictly protect), who recently fled Iran after being jailed for pro-democracy political activism. Amnesty International has been tracking Shahsavar's case; it issued an August 28 statement asserting that it had no current news of his case, to help obscure his presence in Turkey. Shahsavar and Mohamedzadeh described for us their involvement in the Khatami and Mousavi campaigns, detailed the pressure they faced from Iranian security services (including detention and interrogation), spelled out views on Iran's near-term future, and offered advice for the USG on how to deal with the regime.

Pro-Democracy Activists Tell Their Stories

3. (C) Ruhollah Shahsavar is a journalist from Mashad who founded a pro-Khatami and Mousavi election-oriented website called [www.88.net](#) (named after the current Persian year). He was an early supporter of Khatami's candidacy and helped organize several pro-Khatami rallies in Esfahan and Mashad. Following Khatami's withdrawal, Shahsavar joined Mousavi's campaign office in Mashad, organizing a rally for Mousavi's March 2009 visit to Mashad and directing the campaign to attract Mashad's youth vote. Mohamedzadeh is a 25 year old University of Mashad law student. He told us he led Mashad University's pro-Mousavi student group, working for Shahsavar to lead get-out-the-vote efforts for youthful voters in Mashad on election day.

4. (C) Shahsavar said pressure and intimidation from pro-Ahmadinejad forces began several weeks before the

election, coinciding with a surge in popular support for Mousavi. A website run by the Mashad chapter of Ansar-e Hezbollah (a semi-official paramilitary group loyal to Supreme Leader Khamenei) posted pictures of Mousavi campaign activists including Shahsavari with red lines drawn across their faces, printed stories accusing them of spying for foreign powers, and called on the GoI to "uproot these traitors" or Ansar-e Hezbollah would take matters into its own hands. On June 10, ignoring the threats, Shahsavari was interviewed by the Financial Times and predicted a significant Mousavi victory.

15. (C) Early the morning of election day, June 12, Shahsavari was called at home by someone identifying himself as a police officer, warning Shahsavari never to speak again to the foreign press. Within the hour, all cell-phone and SMS service throughout Mashad had been cut, complicating the Mousavi campaign's plan to coordinate polling station monitoring. Even so, Shahsavari said it was clear from watching polling stations around Mashad that a clear majority of voters supported Mousavi. Shahsavari personally witnessed vote-stuffing efforts, including seeing a police colonel take a full ballot box from a polling booth and put it in his car, but he said he had teased Ahmadinejad supporters that afternoon that "even the world's biggest liar, Ahmadinejad, can't deny Mousavi's victory." Shahsavari was interviewed that evening by BBC Persian and VOA, confident in Mousavi's victory. When the GoI announced Ahmadinejad's victory later that night, however, Shahsavari said he grasped immediately that the regime had never intended to allow a free and fair vote, and that a crackdown on democracy activists was probably coming, along with martial law.

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16. (C) Shahsavari was called to the local Intelligence Ministry (MOIS) office on June 13 and warned to support the announced election results or face severe consequences. Mousavi's Mashad campaign team spent that day counseling Mousavi supporters to remain calm, as Mousavi huddled with senior advisors in Tehran to plan next steps. On June 14, Shahsavari's website was shut down by authorities. He was arrested on June 17 along with other journalistic colleagues who had written for his pro-Mousavi website (including Mohamedreza Jalaeipour, Shadi Tabataba'i, and Mousavi's national campaign director Hamza Ghalebi). Shahsavari said he was arrested by local IRGC intelligence agents, not police.

17. (C) Shahsavari said he was taken to a central IRGC detention center in Mashad, undergoing daily interrogation for up to six hours at a time. He said the interrogators' main goal was to try to destroy trust among Mousavi activists, by claiming his colleagues were all betraying each other with evidence of their treasonous activities. His interrogations included verbal intimidation and threats of torture, but no actual physical harm. Shahsavari was aware of many others in the same detention center, though, who were badly beaten, and one friend ("Mr. Mada"), a Mashad University law student arrested June 16, who died of blows to the head on June 26. On June 22 Shahsavari was visited by a Ministry of Justice official who read the charges against him, including threatening national security, and told him that his guilty plea had already been registered with the courts. On June 27, Shahsavari was released on bail. While on bail he says he received almost daily phone calls from IRGC agents saying they were watching him and his family.

18. (C) Three weeks ago Shahsavari was summoned to Mashad's Revolutionary Court for sentencing. He described it as a chaotic scene, full of scores of recently released detainees and family members but only a handful of police, clerks, and judges. The few judges seemed overwhelmed by the caseload, he said. After waiting a full day his case was finally called, and in a process that lasted about 15 minutes the judge sentenced him to probation with a three year jail term if he commits further anti-regime activities. Shahsavari

asked for the verdict in writing but the judge refused. Shabsavar noted that several friends received up to nine year sentences for the same alleged crime, underscoring the arbitrariness of the process.

What Is The Regime Doing?

¶9. (C) Fear of Khatami: Shabsavar speculated that the regime is driven by an obsessive fear of popular overthrow. He said the primary object of their fear is former President Khatami, given his vast popularity. By contrast, regime hardliners see Mousavi and Rafsanjani as less threatening because neither shares Khatami's mass appeal and because they are seen as more dependent on the system. The regime concluded wrongly that with Khatami out of the presidential race, no other candidate would generate the votes to challenge Ahmadinejad. Shabsavar speculated that the false vote tally credited to Ahmadinejad was specifically intended to give him more votes than Khatami had received in his 1997 and 2001 elections.

¶10. (C) First order of business -- kill the Movement: According to Shabsavar, the regime remains unnerved by the potential for a Khatami/Mousavi-led social movement to turn revolutionary, which is why they have detained almost every potential movement leader and are subjecting them to the "show trials." Shabsavar shared a rumor that in mid-August, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) approved a request from IRGC Commander Jafari to arrest Khatami, Mousavi, and Karroubi, as well as Khatami's activist brother Mohammed Reza and Rafsanjani's son Mehdi. Khamenei reportedly intervened to quash to decision, fearing a Khatami arrest in particular would provoke massive street protests. But Shabsavar predicted that the IRGC will continue to press the Supreme Leader and that as an interim step, Khamenei will soon approve the arrest of both Karroubi and Khatami's brother, as soon as the current show trials are completed. Shabsavar also expects to see a travel ban imposed on Khatami soon, putting him under virtual house arrest.

¶11. (C) Shabsavar also shared a rumor of post-election dissension within the IRGC: According to Shabsavar, a Mousavi supporter named Dora Hassani, who was married to a Tehran-based IRGC General also named Hassani, had told Shabsavar that in late June or early July seven high-ranking IRGC officers who opposed the IRGC's use of deadly force

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against demonstrators were arrested and killed. A week later Dora Hassani was also detained; Shabsavar does not know what happened to her.

¶12. (C) The regime is right to be frightened of Khatami, Shabsavar explained. "He is the future of democracy in Iran." Shabsavar asserted that Khatami still has tens of thousands of supporters willing to sacrifice their lives for him. "He is too peaceful a man to ask his supporters to make such sacrifices, but that time may come." Shabsavar said Khatami was scheduled to speak at the Imam Khomeini Shrine in south Tehran in mid-September to mark the "Qadr Night" ceremony. "A million or more supporters will come." Shabsavar predicted Khatami will deliver an important message to his supporters, calling on them to continue a peaceful struggle for democracy in Iran. "It will be calm and respectful, but it will still be like an earthquake against the regime." Shabsavar said such a speech would give new hope and energy to the freedom movement. (Comment: Per reftel, on September 5 the Imam Khomeini Shrine announced that "Qadr Night" ceremonies would not be held this year, the first cancellation of this important ceremony in 20 years.)

¶14. (C) The system is in its final year: Shabsavar predicted that the current structure and leadership of the regime will probably not survive another year. "They have done too much damage. In arresting thousands, they have alienated hundreds of thousands. The system is almost cracking under the

pressure of public discontent. When the next wave comes, it will crack." And if the system muddles through? "In that case, we will do everything we can to win the next election."

Advice on USG policy towards Iran

¶15. (C) Raise political and moral pressure: Shahsavar lamented the west's continuing focus on the nuclear issue rather than the human rights situation. "You have moral authority in Iran when you speak about freedom and democracy, but not when you speak about nuclear weapons. To us, Obama is proof of American ideals. He is the face of democracy. To democracy activists in Iran, he is a marja (a source of emulation)." But Iranian activists are desperate to see stronger statements of support. "Why hasn't Obama said what Merkel has said: that the Iranian regime is like Communism, a failed movement, and the world must unite to help democracy in Iran grow?" Shahsavar urged the USG, along with the UN, EU, and even non-aligned countries, to express stronger public support for democratic activism in Iran, though without naming specific names of Iranian activists. ("That would be their death sentence.") Instead of using the UNSC to punish Iran over its nuclear program, he urged the UNSC to punish the regime, politically and diplomatically, over its egregious human rights violations.

¶16. (C) But economic sanctions only help the IRGC: Economic sanctions, by contrast, only strengthen the IRGC given its dominant control over the black market and smuggling networks. An embargo on Iranian petrol imports, he further asserted, would further hurt most Iranians, efforts to survive daily life, while "making millionaires" of half the IRGC officer corps.

¶17. (C) Where is your democracy assistance going? Shahsavar said many democracy activists in Iran are dismayed by reports of USG democracy funding to Iran as they see no evidence of it, while suffering increased scrutiny and accusations of treason because of it. "If you really are funding democracy in Iran, where's the result? Either make it much more effective, or stop it."

¶18. (C) Help the movement abroad: Shahsavar named several Iranian exiles effectively supporting the movement in Iran. He credited Fatemeh Shams at Oxford University (the wife of detained activist Mohamdreza Jalaeipour) as a driving force in keeping opposition websites running and information flowing into and out from Iran. He said the efforts of exiled journalists like Ebrahim Nabavi and Masoud Behnoud keep a spotlight on the democracy movement's efforts and bolster their morale. "Help make sure they have the technology they need to get information into and out from Iran." By contrast, he said video messages from U.S.-based IRGC founder Mohsen Sazegara are seen as "self-serving and probably funded by the U.S. government."

Shahsavar's own next steps

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¶19. (C) Shahsavar and Mohamedzadeh came to Turkey, entering legally, because they feared they would be re-arrested. We explained the process to register with UNHCR as a temporary refugee, noting onward resettlement to a third country can take a year or often longer. They declined to pursue refugee status and are weighing other options, including contacting VOA about work possibilities, seeking student visas to pursue advanced degrees outside Iran, or returning to Iran despite the risk. Shahsavar said that wherever they go they will continue to work full-time to support democracy in Iran. While in Turkey they are willing to stay in contact with us.

Comment

¶20. (C) We cannot independently confirm any of the anecdotal information shared by Shahsavar, but the description of his experiences in detention and his assessment of the regime's undiminished, visceral fear of a popular mass movement rising against it track with observations we have heard from other sources. Shahsavar's claim, however, that Khatami represents the future of such a movement and that the regime sees him as its greatest threat may oversimplify the challenges the regime is facing from numerous directions, and probably reflects more wishful thinking than rational analysis given Shahsavar's admitted admiration for Khatami. His advice to the USG is also consistent with what we have heard from other Iranian contacts, especially the assertion that the regime and especially the IRGC are prepared not only to withstand further international sanctions, but profit from them as well. End comment.
WIENER